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19 November 2008

MEDIA RELEASE

Minor ailments placing heavy burden on doctors and costing millions of dollars to national health budget

Study reveals 25 million GP consultations per year involve minor ailments

New research into on GP's workload has revealed that significant health resources are being devoted to minor ailments that could be effectively managed by a pharmacist, practice nurse or through responsible self care.

The study commissioned by the Australian Self Medication Industry (ASMI) and conducted by international health industry consultants, IMS, reveals that 15% of all GP consultations involve the treatment of minor ailments, and 7% involve the treatment of minor ailments alone.

When projected nationally the study indicates a total of 25 million GP consultations annually, or approximately 96,000 consultations per day involve the treatment of a minor ailment. Also, approximately 59% of minor ailments resulted in a prescription, suggesting almost 15 million prescriptions being provided for minor ailments.

The research was released today in Sydney at the ASMI conference, *Integrating Self Care into the Healthcare System*.

The Executive Director of ASMI, Juliet Seifert said the findings shed new light on some of the factors behind the heavy workload faced by GPs and in turn, the best use of Australia's health resources.

"It raises the question as to whether a 21st Century health system should see doctors being tied up treating minor ailments.

"There is a real need to examine alternatives to costly GP consultations for minor ailments and other conditions that can be more effectively managed once diagnosed.

"In order to efficiently deliver the best health outcomes, the focus of healthcare should be on encouraging a shift in behaviour from GP to self care and pharmacy as the first point of call for minor ailments.

"This would allow doctors to apply their extensive knowledge and training to best use in treating more serious conditions as well as to longer term preventative health".



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The most common minor ailments identified in the study were acute upper respiratory tract infection, back pain, diarrhoea and gastroenteritis, joint pain, coughs, viral infection, malaise and fatigue, headache and constipation.

Many minor ailments are suited to responsible self care, consultation with a pharmacist or treatment by a nurse practitioner, as are some routine procedures such as refilling of prescriptions.

“At a time when we face acute shortages of GPs around Australia, it is not good use of national health resources to have GPs burdened with tasks that could be effectively and safely managed in other ways,” Ms Seifert said.

The Federal Government’s recent discussion paper on Primary Health Care noted the problems in health care delivery - including large inequalities between urban and rural service delivery - that are a direct result of doctor shortages. In many parts of Australia, doctors have ceased taking on new patients.

“The research suggests that it would be realistic to expect to cut GP workload by 10 per cent. This would release significant GP capacity for more serious conditions and would cut waiting lists,” Ms Seifert said.

“Health budgets simply cannot sustain current levels of activity unless there is far reaching reform to the way we treat and manage primary health”.

The IMS research was based on the Australian Medical Index (AMI) database containing de-identified GP patient records, encompassing data from more than 182,000 patients, 1,020 doctors from around Australia and almost 280,000 consultations.

It follows a similar IMS study in the UK which found 57 million GP consultations annually costing £2 billion and saw a major government program to encourage self care and greater preventative health.

About ASMI: The Australian Self-Medication Industry (ASMI) is the peak industry body for the Australian self care industry representing consumer healthcare products including over-the-counter medicines and complementary medicines. ASMI’s mission is to promote better health through responsible self-care. This means ensuring that safe and effective self-care products are readily available to all Australians at a reasonable cost. ASMI works to encourage responsible use by consumers and an increasing role for cost-effective self-medication products as part of the broad national health strategy.
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